

# HEARERS OF THE WORD

Sirach 3:17-20, 28-29; Ps 68 (67); Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24; Luke 14:1, 7-14

## For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted

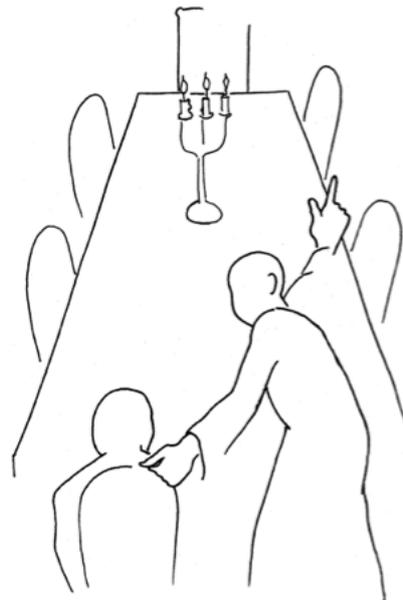
Luke 14:1 On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely. 2 *Just then, in front of him, there was a man who had dropsy.* 3 *And Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees, “Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath, or not?”* 4 *But they were silent. So Jesus took him and healed him, and sent him away.* 5 *Then he said to them, “If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a Sabbath day?”* 6 *And they could not reply to this.*

7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable. 8 “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 9 and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. 10 But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. 11 For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

12 He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14 And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Dining is a notable characteristic of Je-



sus’ ministry, a feature underlined in Luke’s Gospel (in this Gospel Jesus is shown eating about twice as frequently as in the other traditions). Breaking down religious taboos and ignoring social and religious barriers were ways of making the proclamation of the Kingdom of God clear and tangible. In particular, meals—always regarded as sacred and as an act of communion—were used by Jesus to show that God excludes no one.

For the sake of brevity, the lectionary omits vv. 2-6, but they are included in these notes for completeness’ sake.

### KIND OF WRITING

(i) As such, the open table fellowship belongs to a series of prophetic gestures made by Jesus: his baptism, the calling of the twelve, the entry into Jerusalem, the cursing of the fig tree, the action in the Temple and the words over the bread and wine at the Last Supper. Open table fellowship was particularly “edgy” and is found across the genres in

### Thought for the day

Customs surrounding hospitality are deeply embedded in every culture. Normally, we pay little attention to this because we just act “normally.” When we change cultures, however, even simple things like words and gestures of greeting are new, often different. Jesus, in his ministry, took on such deeply embedded, self-serving customs and reversed them in the light of the Gospel reversal of all values. Radical change is always resisted and even today his teaching is put in practice only by the few.

### Prayer

Compassionate God, at your table, all are welcome. As we enjoy your hospitality, help us to take it to heart, so that as we have received, so we may give.

scenes, parables and disputes (see below).

(ii) The passage we are looking at is part of a wider “scene”:

### Chapter 14

1-6 Pronouncement story  
7-11 A parable for the guests  
12-14 A parable for the host  
15-24 One who sat at table said  
25-35 Scene after the meal

### Chapter 13

10-17 Pronouncement story  
18-19 Sayings  
20-21 Sayings  
22-30 Teaching about inclusion  
31-35 Basis for inclusion

The parallel layout means we have to include 14:25-35 in understanding the whole scene. The first three moments are unique to Luke. They do, however, fall into a pattern in the Gospel. This is the third time Jesus is entertained by a Pharisee (7:36-50; 11:37-54; 14:1-24; cf. the meal scene with Levi in 19:1-10). The first four scenes are very closely linked in theme and layout.

A 14:1-6 Lack of concern about others, while being apparently “religious”.  
B 14:7-11 The guest is self-seeking.  
B\* 14:12-14 The host is self-seeking

A\* 14:15-24 Lack of concern about others, while being apparently “religious”

Meals in ancient Greek culture were often the setting for a master to give his teaching.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) The prohibition against work on the Sabbath is well known from various sources. *But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.* (Exod 20:10); *But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.* (Deut 5:14)

(ii) The meals belong to the category of “prophetic gesture” found regularly in the Old Testament. A prophetic gesture is a brief action or drama, performed to draw attention and to make the message of the prophet tangible. This is a complete list: Hosea marries a prostitute - Hosea 1-3; Isaiah gives symbolic names to his children - Is 7:3; 8:14; Jeremiah: the almond tree and the pot - Jer 1:11-14; the waist cloth hidden by the Euphrates Jer 13:1-11; the potter - Jer 18:1-12; the jug - Jer 19; the figs - Jer 24; the yoke - Jer 27-28; buying the field - Jer 32; Ezekiel makes a model of Jerusalem - Ez 4:1-3; the rationed food - Ez 4:9-19; the hair - Ez 5; with the exile’s baggage - Ez 12:1-15; “non-be-reavement” - Ez 24:15-27

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) *Eating as a problem:* The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” (Luke 5:30) Then they said to him, “John’s disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink. (Luke 5:33) For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ (Luke 7:33-34) One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. (Luke 7:36-37) And the

Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:2)

(ii) *Eating as a symbol of the future kingdom:* Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. (Luke 12:37) Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. (Luke 13:29) So that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Luke 22:30)

ST PAUL

Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. (Romans 14:3-4)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 1** A sinister tone is established at the outset on account of the Sabbath (Luke 4:16, 31; 6:1-2, 5-7, 9; 13:10, 14-16; 14:1, 3, 5; 23:54, 56).

**Verse 2** Dropsy: the disease caused both fluid retention and thirst. It was read metaphorically for rich people because the more they have the more they want.

**Verse 3** The challenge is the Sabbath, when work of all kinds was forbidden.

**Verse 4** No words are spoken and yet defiance takes place.

**Verse 5** The defence is based on actual practice, where common sense intervenes.

**Verse 6** Silence again and the tension rises.

**Verse 7** At the time, dining was highly ritualised and guests “rated” by position.

**Verse 8** This parable is directed at the guests, to begin with. The opening thought sounds very practical, like something from the Book of Proverbs.

**Verse 9** A humiliation may follow on presumptuousness.

**Verse 10** This is against the culture – but the “carrot” is final honour.

**Verse 11** A generalised statement, going very much against an “honour-shame” culture.

**Verse 12** This parable is correspondingly directed at the host. Reciprocity is a firm dimension of relationships in an honour-shame system and here the roots of that system are challenged. “In case you would be repaid” is penetrating.

**Verse 13** This reflects Jesus’ own practice of making no distinctions between persons. The poor (Luke 4:18; 6:20; 7:22; 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 18:22; 19:8; 21:2-3, especially Lazarus and the Widow’s mite); crippled (Luke 13:11; 14:13, 21; the woman bent double); lame (Luke 7:22; 14:13, 21); blind (Luke 4:18; 6:39; 7:21-22; 14:13, 21; 18:35; cf. the blind man at Jericho).

**Verse 14** A kind of beatitude, with the features of reversal and future happiness.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The first scene portrays a common dilemma—choosing between a received tradition and what is good in a particular situation. When have I been faced with such dilemmas and how did I respond?
2. Jesus consistently places the “good” above the rules, a challenging position for today’s church at a critical juncture. For example, the Catholic tradition of a celibate clergy can result in depriving communities of the Eucharist. Have I had similar experiences in my own sphere of influence?
3. Seeking respect and (metaphorically) my place at the table is a normal human desire. It can become deformed into the raw putting of myself first while ignoring others.
4. In a disturbing way, Jesus upturns the everyday view of social interaction and relationships. The radical call of the gospel can be very threatening and yet we know that this practical expression mirrors the inclusivity of Jesus’ own proclamation. Where do I feel such a radical call and how do I act?

PRAYER

God and judge of all, you show us that the way to your kingdom is through humility and service.

Keep us true to the path of justice and give us the reward promised to those who make a place for the rejected and the poor. Amen.

# You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God

Heb 12:18 You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, 19 and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. 20 (*For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death."*) 21 *Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."*) 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

## INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The writer of Hebrews—excellent in analysis and advice—does not lack a sense of vision. It is this very visionary aspect which provides the energy behind his exposition and exhortation.

## KIND OF WRITING

Our reading is from the latter part of the letter:

12:1-13	Exhortation
12:14-13:19	Exhortation
13:20-25	Conclusion

The climax of the persuasion is here. the two contrast panels are indicated by “you have not come to” in v. 18 and “you have come to” in v. 22.

## ORIGIN OF THE READING

Throughout, the writer contrasts the OT Temple “system” and Jesus’ offering of himself. As before, the context is the time after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans. In the light of that, how do we “access” God’s presence?

It is likely that we tend to read into the letter the full Western doctrine of atonement, but the writer knows nothing Adam’s fall, God’s anger, penal substitution and the rest. Instead, he teaches that at the core of Jesus offering is not “satisfaction” but Jesus’ total obedience

of heart. A simple statistic can help: in this letter Adam is not mentioned at all whereas Abraham—our father in faith—is named no fewer than ten times.

## RELATED PASSAGES

To sustain the contrast, the writer makes substantial reference to Deut 4-5.

## BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verses 18-19** The verb “to come to” is used throughout the letter to refer to worship. Here, in direct address to the readers, it is used in the perfect tense in Greek. The perfect in Greek has the connotation of what is lasting, contrasting, in Hebrews, with the impermanent nature of the Temple system. The tension is apparent: the readers have already arrived and yet are still on the way.

Old Testament references here include Ex. 19:16–22; Dt. 4:11f.; 5:22–27; 9:19. Notice the emotional effect of the accumulative “ands”. The location (Mount Sinai) is implied and hence not so important. More important is the tangibility of the accompanying events. In the writer’s view, such material “special effects” are part of the earthly anticipation of the true sanctuary in heaven.

In v. 19, the writer has shifted from *Horeb* (Deuteronomy) to *Sinai* (Exodus). In the Bible, these are identical, of course. But the writer wants to make a further contrast with the “terribilita” of the Sinai theophany. The cultic overtones of trumpet and voice are complemented by later apocalyptic associations. The request is not that God would not speak, but that he would not speak *directly, without mediation.*

*They said to Moses, "You speak to us and we will listen, but do not let God speak with us, lest we die."* (Exodus 20:19 NET)

The associated phenomena are not part of the preparation for the theophany but rather part of the theophany itself.

*On the third day in the morning there was thunder and lightning and a dense cloud on the mountain, and the sound of a very loud horn; all the people who were in the camp trembled.* (Exodus 19:16 NET)

**Verses 20-21** These verses are omitted in the lectionary, perhaps because they

might be a distraction from the main line of thought. Exodus 19:12-13 in the Greek OT is greatly abbreviated. Here is the LXX version in English:

*And you shall set limits for the people round about, saying, 'Be on your guard against going onto the mountain and grazing it at all. Everyone who touches the mountain shall die by death. A hand shall not touch it. For he shall be stoned with stones or shot with an arrow. Whether animal or whether human, it shall not live.' Whenever the sounds and the trumpets and the cloud leave the mountain, they shall come up on the mountain.*” (Exodus 19:12–13 LXX)

**Verse 22** “You have come to” is emphatic and contrasting. Superficially, it contrasts Horeb/Sinai with Zion, but it clear that Mount Zion, in the context, refers to heaven and God’s very presence. The subsequent piling up of descriptors is more rhetorical than strictly logical. Thus, the festive gathering of the angels comes before the firstborn.

**Verse 23** The assembly (*ekklesia*) of the firstborn points to the church, both earthly and heavenly. Firstborn (Ex 4:22) *in Christ*. Cf. Heb 2:10–17. Judgment—i.e. the end time “sorting”—is part of the eschatological joy promised. The righteous: the reference is to human beings. The verb “to perfect” is key in all of Hebrews (Heb 2:10; 5:9; 7:19, 28; 9:9; 10:1, 14; 11:40; 12:23).

**Verse 24** The word covenant has not been heard since Heb 10:29, indicating the importance of this verse. The use of mediator here recalls the comparison and contrast with Moses and the old covenant in 8:5f. and 9:15, 19. It leads immediately to reference to his death. The name Jesus is delayed (in Greek) for rhetorical effect. Abel is a surprise, in spite of 11:4. Like Melchizedek, Abel’s “acceptable sacrifice” pre-dated the Levitical priesthood. Thus being superior to Abel, Jesus is *a fortiori* superior to the later Levites. All of humanity is in view.

## POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. What is my own sense of exhilaration, even euphoria, in the faith?
2. Already we are part of the future, even if it is still to be attained.

## PRAYER

God of the covenant, your faithful love in Jesus invites to the festival. Open for us the gates of joy that we may not only be earnest disciples, but joyful believers.

# My child, perform your tasks with humility, then you will be loved

Sir. 3:17 My child, perform your tasks with humility;  
 then you will be loved by those whom God accepts.  
 18 The greater you are, the more you must humble yourself;  
 so you will find favour in the sight of the Lord.  
 20 For great is the might of the Lord;  
 but by the humble he is glorified.  
 21 *Neither seek what is too difficult for you,  
 nor investigate what is beyond your power.*  
 22 *Reflect upon what you have been commanded,  
 for what is hidden is not your concern.*  
 23 *Do not meddle in matters that are beyond you,  
 for more than you can understand has been shown you.*  
 24 *For their conceit has led many astray,  
 and wrong opinion has impaired their judgment.*  
 25 *Without eyes there is no light;  
 without knowledge there is no wisdom.*  
 26 *A stubborn mind will fare badly at the end,  
 and whoever loves danger will perish in it.*  
 27 *A stubborn mind will be burdened by troubles,  
 and the sinner adds sin to sins.*  
 28 When calamity befalls the proud, there is no healing,  
 for an evil plant has taken root in him.  
 29 The mind of the intelligent appreciates proverbs,  
 and an attentive ear is the desire of the wise.

## INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Humility (lit. being down to earth)—in itself an attractive concept—but easily becomes confused with humiliation and low-self esteem. Perhaps this explains the cultural resistance we feel towards it. Even in English, the derivation from humus—ground—helps us to see that being humble means being down to earth, realistic, honest. Vv. 21-27 are included here to give the full context.

## KIND OF WRITING

Sirach is structured around eight poems on the quest for wisdom. This poems mark the start of each major section: 1:1-10; 4:11-19; 6:18-37; 14:20-15:10; 24:1- 34; 32:14-33:18; 38:24-39:11; 44. Sir 3:17-29 invites to reader to attend to what has been revealed in the Torah and not go after useless speculation (Apocalyptic speculation such as 1 Enoch or even Greek philosophy?).

Our reading combines poetry and Wisdom, in a typical mixture of realistic advice and higher principle. The usual vocabulary of the Wisdom books shines through: humility, seek, understand, judgment, knowledge, mind etc. Some verses are in pure biblical parallelism: 20, 21, 24-17 and 29. In the other verses, the second line take the thought forward in some way. Sometimes, this amounts to a reward for behaving

humbly and simply. Other times, it amounts to a warning or threat.

## ORIGIN OF THE READING

Ecclesiasticus or Sirach is to be carefully distinguished from Ecclesiastes or Qoheleth. Both belong to the biblical Wisdom books, but they are very different. Sirach is part of the wider, Alexandrian canon. As such, the book survived mostly in Greek (and Latin) until very recently. About two-thirds of the Hebrew version have been recovered.

Sirach shows many typical Wisdom features: practical advice and proverbs, misogyny, a great appreciation for nature. Added to that, there is a considerable concern with the temple cult.

The book itself gives information about the context of writing:

*So my grandfather Jesus, who had devoted himself especially to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors, and had acquired considerable proficiency in them, was himself also led to write something pertaining to instruction and wisdom, so that by becoming familiar also with his book those who love learning might make even greater progress in living according to the law. (Sir 0:5-10)*

*When I came to Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of the reign of Euergetes and stayed for some time, I found opportunity for no little instruction. It seemed highly necessary that I should myself*

*devote some diligence and labor to the translation of this book. During that time I have applied my skill day and night to complete and publish the book for those living abroad who wished to gain learning and are disposed to live according to the law. (Sir 0:25-35)*

*Instruction in understanding and knowledge I have written in this book, Jesus son of Eleazar son of Sirach of Jerusalem, whose mind poured forth wisdom. (Sir 50:27)*

It seems to have been collated and translated by a scribe named Ben Sira in the early second century BC.

## RELATED PASSAGES

Compare the following passages: 2 Chronicles 7:14; Job 22:29; Proverbs 15:33; Micah 6:8 and Tobit 4:11-10. *The fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom, and humility goes before honour. (Prov 15:33)*

## BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verses 17** The NRSV fails here and the (N)JB is better: *and you will be better loved than a lavish giver.*

**Verse 18** The second line is a purpose clause. Why would God favour the humble? See the OT verses above.

**Verse 28** This is not to say it must always be so; simply, it is often so.

**Verse 29** A typical attitude of the wisdom writers—and a very attractive characteristic in a person.

## POINTERS FOR PRAYER

**1.** It is good reflect about the attitudes we bring to bear in work and in our relationships. Humility being being down to earth about myself and towards others.

**2.** Difficult experiences (not always upgraded to calamities!) are quite revealing about who I am and how I actually live. What have I learned?

**3.** A receptive attitude to the wisdom of other ages and other people can be very enriching. Can I name the people from whom I have learned to be wise?

## PRAYER

O God, from you we come and to you we return. Help us to acknowledge our true place in your plan, truly beloved by you and yet your creature. Help us to seek the wisdom by which we may learn to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with you, our God. We may our prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

# THE LITURGY

Sirach 3:17-20, 28-29; Psalm 68 (67); Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24; Luke 14:1, 7-14

## READINGS 1 AND 3

The reading connects very well with the Gospel, because it gets right under the skin of what it means to be humble.

## THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The poor in the Psalm are those who know their need of God. These are the people who are truly down to earth and in a very healthy way “humble.”

## SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

### First reading

*Sirach 3:17-20, 28-29*

What kind of person would you like to be? Being humble combines being realistic about yourself and receptive towards others.

### Second reading

*Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24*

The opening question behind this reading is a good one: what have we come to? This implies a journey of faith, which is explored by comparing earlier experiences with later ones. As we all do this, it might be good to go back over your own experience.

### Gospel

*Luke 14:1, 7-14*

Social customs were fairly different in the past. But the human heart is the same: we all like being picked out and promoted. Jesus’ teaching is very diametrically opposed.

## WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

### Monday 29 August

*Beheading of John the Baptist*

*1 Corinthians 2:1-5*

The Corinthians found Paul a poor speaker and were unimpressed. He turns this around by saying, in effect, “I don’t want you to be impressed by fine speeches and even logic, because as the centre stands the contradiction of the cross.”

*Mark 6:17-29*

The execution of John the Baptist is corroborated in the writings of Josephus

who gives the location as Macchaerus (in Jordan today). Mark gets a bit confused in the Herod family relationships (which is easy) and he embellishes the account with features taken from the book of Esther. Nevertheless, the death of John the Baptist was clearly significant.

### Tuesday 30 August

*St Fiacre*

*1 Corinthians 2:10-16*

What should we say of the Holy Spirit in our lives? We could do worse than pay attention to the first and last affirmations of this reading: “The Spirit reaches the depths of everything, even the depths of God.” “But we are those who have the mind of Christ.”

*Luke 4:31-37*

What *kind* of authority did Jesus have? Truly effective authority, as we see in this remarkable story.

### Wednesday 31 August



*St Aidan, bishop and missionary and the saints of Lindisfarne*

*1 Corinthians 3:1-9*

Continuing his argument with the Corinthians, Paul starts by admitting that after his preaching there was more to be said by the likes of Apollos. Nevertheless, preachers are only those who plant and water. It is God who gives the growth.

*Luke 4:38-44*

Our Gospel today shows us Jesus as a very busy person who also needed to “recharge his batteries”, as we say. Luke underlines throughout the prayer and prayerfulness of Jesus.

### Thursday 1 September

*1 Corinthians 3:18-23*

The Corinthians were inclined to think of themselves as spiritually advanced and, in various ways, superior. Such boasting has no place and Paul knocks it firmly on the head.

*Luke 5:1-11*

Usually, the call stories are stripped of all human interest. Luke make the response of the first disciples more credible is showing that they did indeed have some previous experience of Jesus.

### Friday 2 September

*1 Corinthians 4:1-5*

Judging others, especially people in leadership, is a constant “pastime”, even in earliest communities of faith. Paul has no truck with such human assessments: only God is his, and our, judge.

*Luke 5:33-39*

Jesus was challenged because in his ministry he was not traditional. For example, he did not promote fasting. The early church did take up fasting and our Gospel is an attempt to explain why this is okay even if Jesus himself did not promote it. The marriage symbolism is part of the preaching of the Kingdom.

### Saturday 3 September

*St Gregory the Great, pope and doctor*

*1 Corinthians 4:6-15*

Once more, Paul tries to set aside party politics in the life of the community. He gives a very moving account of the lowly role of the apostle—a *tour de force*. At the same time, he does not neglect to remind the Corinthians of the origin of the faith among them and he (alone!) is their one father.

*Luke 6:1-5*

Today’s Gospel is an funny little story and one could be bold and ask what were the Pharisees doing in a cornfield on the Sabbath!! The main point, however, cannot be missed: Jesus’ ministry was utterly new, calling for novelty in thought and practice.